

Message Text

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SUBJECT: THE FDP WORKS TO REFORM ITSELF

REF: BONN A-51 OF FEBRUARY 22, 1977

BEGIN SUMMARY: SOBERED BY ITS RELATIVELY POOR SHOWING
IN LAST YEAR'S NATIONAL ELECTION, THE FDP HAS LAUNCHED
AN AMBITIOUS PROGRAM OF INTERNAL REFORMS TO STRENGTHEN
ITS GRASS-ROOTS APPEAL. THE PROGRAM APPEARS WELL CON-
CEIVED AND HAS THE FULL BACKING OF PARTY CHAIRMAN
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GENSCHER. HOWEVER, WE SEE A NUMBER OF FACTORS WHICH
LIMIT THE FDP'S ABILITY TO CHANGE ITSELF AND WHICH THUS
CAST DOUBTS ON THE PROSPECTS THAT THIS NEW REFORM PRO-
GRAM WILL SUCCEED. END SUMMARY.

1. SUCCESS IN COALITION POLITICS HAS NOT ENABLED THE
FREE DEMOCRATIC PARTY (FDP) TO BROADEN ITS BASE OF

VOTER SUPPORT. SOBERED BY ITS RELATIVELY POOR SHOWING IN THE 1976 NATIONAL ELECTION (DOWN FROM 1972 BUT UP FROM 1969), THE FDP RECENTLY LAUNCHED A NEW CAMPAIGN TO DEVELOP A SOLID MARGIN ABOVE THE FIVE-PERCENT DANGER ZONE WHICH HAS ALWAYS THREATENED IT.

2. PARTY CHAIRMAN GENSCHER HAS PUT GUENTER VERHEUGEN, THE NEW BUSINESS MANAGER OF THE FDP, IN CHARGE OF THIS CAMPAIGN. VERHEUGEN HAS A THREE-PRONGED MISSION: TO FLESH OUT THE PARTY APPARAT, WHICH HAS BEEN LARGELY NONEXISTENT AT THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT LEVEL; TO INFUSE THE PARTY PROGRAM WITH NEW CONTENT WHICH WILL APPEAL TO THE INDEPENDENT VOTER; AND TO BUILD A BASE OF LOCAL CONTACTS AND SUPPORT WHICH WILL ENABLE THE FDP TO CAPTURE THE POTENTIAL 10-20 PERCENT OF THE GERMAN ELECTORATE TO WHICH IT ASPIRES. ACCORDING TO VERHEUGEN, THE FDP HAS NO DELUSIONS OF BECOMING A MASS PARTY BUT BELIEVES THAT IT CAN AT LEAST DOUBLE ITS SHARE OF THE GERMAN POLITICAL SPECTRUM WITH A "NEW" PROGRAM OF LIBERAL IDEAS TAILORED TO CONCERNS OF THE DAY. VERHEUGEN SEES MUCH ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT HERE; I.E., HE CLAIMS THAT, IN NATIONAL ELECTIONS, THE SPD AND THE CDU/CSU COMMAND SUPPORT FROM 90 PERCENT OF THEIR SUPPORTERS WHILE THE FDP RECEIVES THE VOTES OF ONLY 50 PERCENT OF ITS SUPPORTERS.

3. VERHEUGEN IS APPROACHING HIS TASK WITH CONFIDENCE AND DISPATCH. HE HAS SET UP A PROGRAM COMMISSION TO WORK OUT SEVERAL BASIC THEMES (BUILDING ON THE PARTY'S LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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FREIBURG THESES ADOPTED IN 1971) WHICH THE FDP NATIONAL CONVENTION WILL DEBATE, AND PRESUMABLY RATIFY, IN NOVEMBER. INTERIOR MINISTER MAIHOFFER AND ECONOMICS MINISTER FRIDERICH, REPRESENTING RESPECTIVELY THE LEFT AND RIGHT WINGS OF THEIR PARTY, CHAIR THIS COMMISSION. VERHEUGEN HAS ALSO CREATED A SEVEN-MAN PROJECT GROUP, WHOSE FIRST TASK IS TO CANVASS A SAMPLE (1650) OF THE FDP'S 80,000 MEMBERS, AND AN EQUAL NUMBER OF CITIZENS REGARDED AS "POTENTIAL" FDP VOTERS, TO DETERMINE THEIR CONCERNS ON ISSUES OF THE DAY. RESULTS FROM THIS SURVEY WILL BE FED BACK INTO THE PROGRAM COMMISSION. THE PROJECT GROUP IS ALSO STUDYING THE PERFORMANCE OF OTHER EUROPEAN LIBERAL PARTIES--E.G., IN SWEDEN AND THE UK.

4. IN RECENT PUBLIC STATEMENTS AND PEP-TALKS WITH HIS PARTY CADRE, VERHEUGEN HAS SKETCHED OUT THE FOLLOWING BASIC ELEMENTS OF HIS REFORM CAMPAIGN.

A. THE FDP MUST ABANDON ITS STRATEGY OF RELYING SOLELY ON THE STRENGTH OF ITS NATIONAL LEADERS--IN THE MAIN, BONN CABINET MINISTERS--TO PULL OUT VOTERS ON ELECTION DAY. IN VERHEUGEN'S VIEW, THIS STRATEGY FAILED IN 1976 AND GOES FAR TO EXPLAIN WHY THE PARTY GOT ONLY 7.9 PERCENT OF THE VOTE. INSTEAD, THE FDP MUST WIDEN ITS BASE

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BY PROMOTING A LIBERAL "PRESENCE" AT ALL LEVELS OF GERMAN SOCIETY, IN PARTICULAR IN LOCAL GOVERNMENTS. VERHEUGEN SEES A CHANCE FOR THE FDP TO MOVE TOWARD THIS GOAL BY IDENTIFYING ITSELF WITH CITIZENS' INITIATIVES ("BUERGERINITIATIVEN"), A MOUNTING PHENOMENON OF FRG POLITICAL LIFE WHICH SUGGESTS--IN HIS VIEW--A GROWING

ALIENATION BETWEEN THE MAN ON THE STREET AND THE BIG
POLITICAL PARTIES.

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B. THE FDP MUST INCREASE THE POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT OF
WOMEN IN ITS RANKS, IN ALL AREAS OF PARTY ACTIVITY AND
NOT JUST THE TRADITIONAL ONES RESERVED FOR WOMEN.

C. THE FDP HISTORICALLY GAINS ITS LARGEST PERCENTAGE
SHARE OF VOTERS IN THE 18-32 YEAR-OLD GROUP. THE PARTY
MUST HOLD THIS SHARE AND BROADEN ITS APPEAL IN OTHER
AGE GROUPS WHICH USUALLY VOTE ELSEWHERE. PATHS TOWARD
THIS GOAL WILL INCLUDE: USING RESULTS FROM THE VOTER
OPINION SURVEY, MESHING LOCAL FDP ORGANIZATIONS AND
CITIZENS' INITIATIVES, AND DEMOCRATIZING THE PARTY
SO THAT THE CENTER AND ITS OUTLYING DISTRICTS SHARE
INFORMATION AND DECISION-MAKING TO A GREATER DEGREE
THAN IN THE PAST.

D. THE FDP MUST RELY LESS ON SOCIOECONOMIC DATA IN
DEFINING ITS MEMBERSHIP, AND SEEK TO APPEAL TO GROUPS
BEYOND THE UPWARD-MOBILE, ECONOMICALLY WELL-OFF. THE
FDP MUST, IN SHORT, WIN OVER INDEPENDENT-MINDED VOTERS
FROM ALL INCOME BRACKETS.

5. TO DATE, VERHEUGEN HAS PROPOSED TWO STRUCTURAL
CHANGES WHICH WILL PREPARE THE WAY FOR MORE BASIC
REFORMS.

A. HE WANTS A PARTY "SCHOOL" WHICH WILL TRAIN LOCAL
WORKERS IN BASIC TECHNIQUES OF ORGANIZATION AND COMMU-
NICATION WITH THE VOTER. HE HOPES THAT THIS SCHOOL WILL
BE ABLE TO TRAIN SOME 5,000 FDP GRASS-ROOTS WORKERS IN
TIME FOR THE NEXT NATIONAL ELECTIONS (1980).

B. HE HAS MOVED TO COMPUTERIZE THE FDP'S MEMBERSHIP
FILES AND CORRESPONDENCE. THIS WILL ENABLE THE PARTY
TO USE MORE EFFECTIVELY ITS LIMITED RESOURCES, PAR-
TICULARLY IN PRIORITY AREAS WHERE THE FDP HAS BEEN
TRADITIONALLY WEAK AND WHERE THE FIRST 1977 MEMBERSHIP
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DRIVES WILL BE MADE: E.G., ABOVE ALL, IN THE VOTER-
RICH RUHR DISTRICT, AND ALSO IN BAVARIA, LOWER SAXONY,
HESSE, AND RHINELAND-PALATINATE.

6. COMMENT. ONE CAN SAFELY SAY, AT THIS EARLY POINT, THAT VERHEUGEN HAS SET FORTH AN AMBITIOUS PROGRAM WHICH APPEARS WELL-CONCEIVED AND WHICH HAS THE FULL SUPPORT OF GENSCHER. HE HAS TWO INGREDIENTS FOR EVENTUAL SUCCESS, ALTHOUGH THIS IS NOT THE FIRST TIME THAT THE FDP HAS SOUGHT SELF-REJUVENATION AND--IN VERHEUGEN'S WORDS--IT WILL NOT BE THE LAST. ON THE OTHER HAND, WE SEE SEVERAL FACTORS WHICH LIMIT THE FDP'S CAPACITY FOR RADICAL CHANGE AND WHICH THUS CAST DOUBT ON THE LIKELIHOOD THAT VERHEUGEN WILL ACHIEVE HIS GOALS.

A. HISTORICALLY, THE FDP HAS HOUSED THE ODD GROUPS IN GERMAN POLITICS: ANTI-CLERICALS, NINETEENTH-CENTURY ECONOMISTS, INDEPENDENT NATIONALISTS, AND THOSE DISCOMFITED BY THE LARGER MASS PARTIES. THE SPD AND CDU/CSU CAN USE THEIR LARGE SHARE OF THE ELECTORATE TO CUSHION DAMAGE FROM IN-HOUSE SQUABBLES. THIS IS NOT THE CASE WITH THE FDP, WHOSE SIZE HAS ALWAYS MENACED ITS POLITICAL EXISTENCE AND WHOSE INNER CONTRASTS ARE SO GREAT THAT THE LEADERSHIP CAN HAZARD CHANGE ONLY AT GREAT RISK TO PARTY UNITY.

B. THE FDP HAS, TO SOME DEGREE, SHACKLED ITS INDEPENDENCE BY SIGNING COALITION AGREEMENTS. AN ADDITIONAL HANDICAP IS THAT THE FDP HAS NOW FORMED COALITIONS WITH BOTH MAJOR PARTIES IN DIFFERENT LAENDER, AND HENCE WILL HAVE PROBLEMS IN CHARTING A NEW NATIONAL COURSE THAT DOES NOT STRAIN ONE OF THESE ALLIANCES.

C. THE FDP HAS AN IMAGE PROBLEM. A FAINT WHIFF OF OPPORTUNISM AND THE REPUTATION OF BEING A "BLOCK PARTY" HAVE BEEN SOMEWHAT DISPELLED BY RECENT COALITIONS ON THE LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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LAND LEVEL WITH THE CDU, BUT THESE STEPS INCREASE THE INTERNAL STRESSES DISCUSSED ABOVE. THE IMAGE PROBLEM HAS BEEN ENHANCED BY THE MUSHY BRAND OF LIBERALISM WHICH

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THE PARTY FOLLOWS IN ORDER TO HOLD ITS CONSTITUENT
GROUPS UNDER THE SAME ROOF, AND BY ITS APPARENT WILLING-
NESS TO ENTER COALITIONS WITH ANY PARTNER.

D. ONE CAN ONLY GUESS AS TO WHAT NEW "GREAT ISSUES"
A COMMISSION LED BY SUCH DIFFERENT TYPES AS MAIHOFFER
AND FRIDERICH WILL CHOOSE. THE PARTY MAY HAVE TO RE-
SURRECT TWO OF ITS CLASSICAL STAND-BYS: CHURCH-STATE
RELATIONS, AND EDUCATIONAL REFORM. HERE, ITS RECORD
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OFFERS SCANT CAUSE FOR HOPE. AS VERHEUGEN WROTE RE-
CENTLY, THE FDP FAILED TO SEEK AGGRESSIVE REFORM IN
CHURCH-STATE RELATIONS, AND WATCHED ITS PLANS FOR
EDUCATIONAL REFORM FOUNDER IN THE RESISTENCE OF CULTURAL
BUREAUCRATS AND TEACHERS' UNIONS. THE ACID TEST OF ANY
NEW PARTY THESES WILL BE WHETHER THEY CAN ATTRACT NEW
VOTERS TO A PROGRAM WHICH--BY DEFINITION--IS LIKELY TO
BE LESS CONCRETE AND IDEOLOGICAL THAN THE PROGRAMS OF
OTHER PARTIES ON THE GERMAN POLITICAL SCENE. THE TRA-

DITIONAL FDP FAITHFUL WILL NO DOUBT RALLY, BUT THE PROBLEM IS HOW TO CONVERT "POTENTIAL" SUPPORTERS INTO VOTING MEMBERS OF THE PARTY.

E. THE FDP MUST HAVE A YOUTH WING IN ORDER TO BROADEN ITS BASE EFFECTIVELY. IN PRACTICE, THIS MEANS THAT THE PARTY MUST SEEK TO MOBILIZE ITS AFFILIATED YOUTH GROUP, THE GERMAN YOUNG DEMOCRATS (JUDO'S), WITHOUT TURNING OFF MORE MODERATE VOTERS. THIS MAY REQUIRE A SQUARING OF THE POLITICAL CIRCLE. THE JUDO'S ARE FAR TO THE LEFT OF THE PARTY; IN MANY WAYS THEY STAND CLOSER TO THE SPD AND YOUNG SOCIALISTS THAN TO THE BRAND OF LIBERALISM WHICH GENSCHER AND VERHEUGEN ESPOUSE. YET THE JUDO'S NEED A PARTY WITH WHICH TO IDENTIFY, AND TO DATE ONLY THE FDP HAS FILLED THAT ROLE. THE CURRENT JUDO-FDP RELATIONSHIP IS STRAINED (AS NOTED AT THE JUDO CONGRESS EARLIER THIS MONTH--BONN'S A-5L), BUT WE SUSPECT THAT BOTH SIDES WILL OPT TO CONTINUE IT FOR THE TIME BEING. IT IS REMOTELY CONCEIVABLE, BUT AT PRESENT MOST SIGNS POINT THE OTHER WAY, THAT VERHEUGEN'S REFORMS WILL ONE DAY ENLIST THE JUDO'S IN ACTIVE SUPPORT OF FDP PROGRAMS AND CANDIDATES. IF THEY DO NOT HOWEVER THE CAMPAIGN TO BROADEN THE BASE OF THE FDP'S PYRAMID WILL SUFFER A MAJOR SETBACK. END COMMENT.
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